

Shortgrassers Normal, Need One More Rain

4-14-66

Page 9

By Monte Noelke

MERTZON, Texas — The light showers which hit this part of the shortgrass country awhile back did wonders to change the scene.

Of course, people in many parts of the world would barely notice what we deem a bountiful windfall of moisture, and I don't suppose we are justified in becoming so excited when only a tenth of an inch is found in a rain gauge tube containing enough bugs to account for half the measurement.

But when you consider that a native shortgrasser in his whole lifetime sees about the same amount of rainfall that an Eskimo sees of ideal skin diving weather it is easier to understand our common practice of falling into near-hysterics at sight of a mud puddle and becoming practically irrational at the sound of far-off thunder.

The most important change brought by the showers was the renewal, among our sheep population, of the will to live. We were on the verge of a catastrophe, one that had reached the point where serious-minded citizens were predicting that this was going to end up being straight cow country. To strengthen the latter belief, wobbly old ewes were cooperating by showing their ageless ability to dramatize their death by staring their owner or herder in the eye.

In fact, taking into account how many of these thoughtless old beggars were able to pass on in full view of ranchers or herdsmen, it's amazing that the roadways weren't suddenly overrun in a mass exodus to the Peace Corps recruiting centers, or a stampede to the nearest coast resulting in more application for apprentice seamen's jobs than since the other depression of the '30s.

Peak of the winter sheep crisis was marked by one of the most fascinating tasks of the wool and lamb industry — packing the sick ewes to corrals so that they can shortly later be dragged back to the pasture for burial or cremation. This pastime has contributed immeasurably to this particular section of the state through three major effects: (1) redirection of young ranch-raised boys from ranching to higher education; (2) making many a sheepman yearn for a saner occupation like, say, flagging motorcycle races; and (3) giving ranch wives justification for keeping every window in the house darkened by curtains all winter long.

Considerable benefits from this operation have accrued also to medical experts specializing in treatment of back troubles. Nearly any class of healer, from back-popping wrestling doctors to those who hypnotize for disc trouble have been able to practice up on prairie people who nurse sheep. Then there's the small boom that liniment manufacturers can credit to the checking-in and out procedure.

However, rare indeed is the shortgrasser who lets this trouble get him down. Though he may be weakened to the extent that he couldn't withstand a minor case of heartburn, he carries on the tradition of hauling the mucous-emitting beasts into the corral or hospital trap. Faithful he injects a few million units of some high-priced drug, then patiently awaits the death ceremony.

But now the situation is improving. Mother ewes are leading their lambs far and wide for the green pickings. The shortgrassers as a group seem to be rallying; if they have a care in the world, the casual observer wouldn't detect it.

All we need to feel we're in heaven is a half-inch rain and a secret formula to keep all four stomachs of our cow brutes from collapsing before it comes.